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ABSTRACT

A study examined the validity of the distinction between interactional language, used to express social relations and personal attitudes, and transactional language, which conveys factual or prepositional information and is message oriented, within and across languages and cultures. Data were drawn from natural telephone conversations of three types: Chinese native speakers (n=6 females) conversing in China; Chinese native speakers (n=6 females) conversing in Chinese in the United States; and native English speakers (n=6 females) conversing in English in the United States. Only outgoing calls made from the participants' homes, intended for other females, were used. The corpus included 267 calls collected over six months. Transactional, interactional, and mixed transactional/interactional language was analyzed in each call, and both common and culture-specific characteristics of the language in the three call types are identified and discussed. Shared features of the two cultures are found in phatic inquiries, pre-closing strategies, initiation of closing, and formality of style. Cultural differences include self-identification sequence and interactional patterns in closing. (MSE)

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A Functional Approach to Discourse:
Interactional vs. Transactional Telephone Conversations

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Studies in discourse analysis has been conducted in many disciplines and from different approaches. Today, I will report on my study of natural conversation with a functional focus. Brown and Yule (1983) propose that there are two major functions of language: interactional and transactional. "Interactional" language is used to express social relations and personal attitudes. On the other hand, "transactional" language conveys factual or prepositional information and is message oriented. My research examines, among others, the validity of such distinction within and across languages and cultures. It is part of my research findings of my dissertation which is entitled "Telephone conversations in Chinese and English: A comparative study across languages and functions."

Following the comparative discourse model proposed by Saville-Troike and Johnson (1994), my research uses a data base of natural telephone conversations recorded in Chinese by native speakers of Chinese and in English by native speakers of American English. One of the dimensions of comparison in my research is focused on the differences and similarities between telephone calls that are made for interactional and transactional purposes.

Natural data were collected from three groups: Chinese in China, Chinese in the U.S., and Americans in the U.S. There are 18 female participants with whom I am personally acquainted that have provided the data for this study: 6 native speakers of Chinese in China, 6 native speakers of Chinese in the U.S., and 6 Americans. The demographic profile of the participants are relatively similar which include age, education and occupation.

The telephone conversations were recorded at participants' households. Only out-

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going calls intended for female recipients were used in my data. Therefore, all the calls were initiated by my participants. The recording was done with the prior consent of the callers. The corpus include a total of 267 calls collected over more than six months. After my initial analysis of the data, I also conducted interviews with my participants in the U.S. to both verify my analysis and to elicit their interpretations of their sociolinguistic behavior.

One of my research question addresses the issue of the differences and similarities between interactional discourse and transactional discourse. Specifically: How do native speakers of Chinese and native speakers of English conduct interactional talk versus transactional talk in Chinese and English, respectively? Particularly, how do they open and close telephone conversations? How do they present purposes of calls?

In the present study, I have grouped all the calls under 3 categories: T calls, I calls, and I-T calls. T calls refer to transactional calls, i.e., calls made to businesses or institutions either for information or transactional purposes. I calls stand for Interactional calls, which are social calls primarily to extend greetings and to exchange information on each other's well-being. I-T calls is the short form for Interactional-Transactional calls. They refer to calls made to acquaintances with specific subject and purpose to discuss other than just to "touch base."

Differences between the two types of talk common to both language groups are evidenced in the (1) presence and distribution of phatic utterances (such as 'How are you'), (2) in the presence and distribution of pre-closing (3) in initiation of closings, and (4) in language choices for statement of purposes. In addition, there are characteristics that exemplify the different types of calls within each language but not shared by both cultures. In the Chinese language group, closing shows salient differences between the two types of calls. In the English data, the most salient differences are in the identification sequence. Interviews with participants are incorporated into the analyses.

I will first discuss characteristics of commonality that are evidenced in both Chinese and English. Features that are culture specific will be presented afterwards.

I. Shared Features between Chinese and English

The differences between interactional discourse and transactional discourse that are evidenced in both Chinese and English include phatic talk, pre-closing, initiation of closing, and the choice of language.

A. Phatic inquiries

Phatic inquiries as defined in this study include questions such as "How are you?" or "How are you doing?" in English and similar inquiries in Chinese that address either addressees' state of well-being in general or specific conditions. As the data show, phatic utterances constitute one of the major features that distinguish interactional discourse from transactional discourse. Its percentage distribution among the different types of discourse indexes the relative significance of phatic interaction in different interactional context. The percentage distribution shows that phatic utterances are indispensable in an overwhelming majority of interactional calls prior to purpose statement, with 95% for Chinese (CC) and 89% for English (AA).

On the contrary, the prototypical transactional calls wherein callers and recipients engage in conversations that are oriented for business information exchange or transaction, such phatic interaction is uncommon, and the occurrence of phatic interaction becomes marked rather than unmarked as in interactional calls. In terms of percentage, in the Chinese CC data, there is absolute absence of phatic interaction in T calls. In the English AA data, there is 12% phatic talk, which shows a sharp contrast with interactional calls. For those 12% of transactional calls in which phatic interaction occurs, all the participants are acquainted even before the conversation takes place, and therefore, the occurrence of phatic inquiries is more contextual bound with the social relation factor.

It is interesting to note that for I-T calls, the occurrence of phatic utterances is at a middle point between the two ends: they are present in 57% of the calls in Chinese and present in 71% of calls for English. Such a patterns seems to suggest that, with specific agenda to discuss, interlocutors sometimes proceed with the discussion of the main purpose without first being engaged in phatic exchanges. Moreover, it may be surprising that such pher.omenon is actually more common in Chinese than in English, therefore

presenting a challenge to the prevalent portrait which inaccurately characterizes Chinese discourse as invariably being "indirect," with "small talk" always leading the interaction.

Furthermore, the distribution of the percentage spread along a continuum lends support to the validity of the need to identify a mixed category of interactional/transactional discourse to be differentiated from the other two (interactional or transactional).

B. Pre-closing

Pre-closing is another indicator of the differences between the I calls and the T calls. Pre-closing, a term I borrowed from Schegloff and Sacks (1973) but defined differently in my present study, is used to refer to either party's unsuccessful attempt to close the conversation due to either the continuation of the discussion of the previous topic or the introduction of a new topic introduced by either party.

Pre-closing is found mostly in I calls, with the distribution of one-third in the Chinese data and in more than half of the English data. This pattern indicates that closing is not always accomplished in a linear fashion in interactional calls, nor might it be desirable for such discourse which emphasizes interaction. Interlocutors sometimes carry on the conversation even though one party has expressed the intention to close the talk.

For T calls, on the other hand, pre-closing is rare. In the Chinese set, pre-closing is non-existent while its occurrence in the English data is only 6% . Compared with the percentage in I calls, the difference is substantial. In the case of I-T calls, pre-closing occurs rarely in the Chinese data (5%) and it occurs in less than one-third of I-T calls in English (29%).

The difference in the percentage distribution of pre-closing among different types of calls is not a random phenomenon: it reflects the functions of discourse as well as the role relationship between the participants. For interactional calls, the purpose is to socialize. Callers and recipients express their concerns for each other, their appreciation and the enjoyment of the conversation with the partner throughout the interaction. Such a function also permeates in the process of closing. Within such a context, the enthusiasm

to continue the present conversation, or the added-on topic, may not be perceived as inappropriate, given that interactional talk usually takes place in an unhurried manner. It may in fact suggests the density of the social relation between the two parties. For transactional calls, on the contrary, as the main purpose is for business information exchange or transaction, the boundary of when to terminate the talk is easy to define and perceive by both sides. The achievement of closing is typically linear and brief.

Moreover, the role relation between the two parties is also reflected in pre-closing. The occurrence of pre-closing may suggest either relatively equal status or a close social relation between the two parties; the fact that the closing of conversation is being negotiated mutually indexes the relatively meager social distance between the two parties. In contrast, in T calls, as the role relations between callers and recipients are usually clearly defined - customer versus service people, closing is prototypically initiated by customers. The service representatives or sales persons usually respond to customers' requests accordingly, but they do not initiate closings, nor do they carry on conversations if customers deem they are ready to terminate the calls. Moreover, since most of the dyads in such contexts are unacquainted, there is little actual need for further conversation, let alone the introduction of a new topic if the caller has expressed the wish to close the conversation.

This pattern of pre-closing is also consistent with the previous observation regarding phatic exchanges, indicating that there is substantial difference between the different functions of calls. As the data show, presence of pre-closing is a strong feature of interactional calls, indicating the close social distance and the interactive nature of the discourse. However, pre-closing hardly occurs in transactional calls. Such absence (in the Chinese case) and low occurrence (in the English case) of pre-closing reflects the fact that interactional pattern and discourse structure is constrained by the purpose and function of the discourse and the nature of the role relations of the participants.

C. Initiation of closing

By "initiation of closing", I am referring to linguistic forms through which the closing section for telephone conversations begin. In each call, one utterance in the

conversation is identified as such, and the following section of conversation is considered the closing section wherein interlocutors wrap up their conversation. Here, the coding is based on a functional/structural criterion, rather than a criterion of forms. Specifically, what is identified as "initiation of closing"" is not judged by the forms; rather, it is the function of the language in relation to what precedes and follows this expression that determines if a certain utterance is identified as "initiation of closing." Therefore, for the same expression "Thank you," depending on what function it serves within the context, it may be identified as an initiation of closing or otherwise.

As I mentioned earlier, there are distinctive features for both interactional telephone conversation closings and transactional telephone conversation closings regardless of the language.

For T calls, "Thank you" in English and □□ (in Chinese) "thank you' along with its variant forms are the prototypical means through which closing is initiated.

For I calls or I-T calls, on the other hand, expression of gratitude usually does not function as initiation of closing, even if thanking is part of the closing. Rather, it conveys either party's appreciation of a favor performed by the interlocutor or of the calling. However, the actual initiation of closing is often realized in other forms such as "I'll see you tomorrow," "I'll talk to you later" or other forms. In the example shown earlier, we have "Well, I'll let you go" and "Well, I'd better get off the phone."

In addition to the difference in linguistic forms, who initiates closing also displays difference between I calls and T calls. For T calls, closings are mostly initiated by callers (100% for Chinese and 85% for English), suggesting that in such interaction, the right to terminate the call is assumed to belong to callers, given the customer-service relation in such interactional context. Such an assumption, however, may not be undertaken to the same extent as it is in I calls or I-T calls. In I calls, caller-initiated closing drops to 88% in Chinese and 50% in English. In I-T calls, it is 68% for both Chinese and English data.

The interaction pattern for initiating closing is interesting: it shows that there are actually unspoken rules native speakers follow in spite of the fact that they may not be aware of the rule (to be discussed below). It seems that in either I calls or I-T calls,

participants are engaged in on-going interactions and who initiates closing is a matter of circumstantial needs, negotiation as well as collaboration. On the other hand, in T calls, there is the assumed understanding that callers have the "ownership" of initiation of closing; if a T call is terminated with recipient-initiated closing, it is always a marked case and is usually noticed by the caller.

It is also interesting that interlocutors are actually not consciously aware of the issue of initiation of closing. In my interview with my participants, when asked who is to initiate closing in different telephone conversations, participants could not provide definitive answers, which lends support to the fact that sociolinguistic behavior is subconscious; native speakers are not aware of the "rules" of interaction until we discuss the rules and conduct research, or when we compare rules of other cultures with our own.

Initiation of closing, therefore, exemplifies differences between interactional calls and transactional calls in two aspects: first, initiation of closing is realized in different linguistic forms in different types of calls: while it is "Thank" which typically brings the conversation to closure in T calls, it is usually in other forms that I calls and I-T calls come to its close. Furthermore, callers usually initiate closings in T calls but it is not necessarily the case in I calls or I-T calls.

D. Choice of language

Lastly, the choice of language for presenting statement of purposes varies between T calls and I-T calls (I calls are not comparable in this respect because the purpose is still phatic). For T calls, purposes of calls are usually conveyed through expressions that are formal and distant. In Chinese, callers often soften the requests or minimize the imposition of the requests with expressions such as □ 'please,' □□□ 'trouble you,' and □□□ 'excuse me.' Similar cases have been observed in English: for statement of purposes, there seems to be some commonly used expressions such as "I am calling to...," "I was wondering if...," "I wanted to ask you ...," or "Can you tell me ...." Choice of words tend to be more formal and requests are usually phrased in more fixed patterns.

Participants who reside in China observe the differences between the types of calls. For calls to businesses or institutions, they point out, polite language and courteous

expressions are desirable to build a good image of the caller, which is conductive for the achievement of the purposes of calling. For example, one of my participants mentioned that she would address recipients as "Mr." or "Miss" first. Other participants stated that the purposes should be explicitly articulated in precise and plain language. In addition, the calls will be brief and terminate as soon as the main purposes are conveyed.

With friends or acquaintances, such choice of words for statement of purpose is inappropriate because they indicate apparent distance and formality between the interlocutors. When calling friends or acquaintances, there is no such constraint or consideration, my Chinese participants maintain. Formulaic expressions to show courtesy at the beginning or end of the conversations will not be necessary. One can talk casually, discuss any topics as they come up during the course of conversations, and the conversations tend to be longer. One collaborator specifically stated that calls with friends would be informal and relaxed. She would move onto the purpose directly after addressing the recipient and end the talk with □□ 'Bye.'

Similar findings have been evidenced in English. With regard to the presentation of purpose, I-T calls do not demonstrate the same language choice. The most commonly used expressions for T calls such as "I am calling..." or "I was wondering ..." are not evidenced in I-T calls, for example. Furthermore, there are more varieties of ways of presenting one's purposes. One of the most commonly encountered word is "just" as in "I just wanted to ...." There are not many expressions or structures which are used by all callers. The different choice of language for the different types of calls is related to register, social distance and role relations between the interlocutors.

II. Language specific features

Not only are there characterisitics that are displayed in both languages, there are language specific features that are evidenced in one language.

A. Identification sequence

For the English data, what is salient is the identification sequence. In the AA set of English T calls, self-identification is provided for in the first turn, and therefore the initial answer usually consists of both greetings and self-identification. For I calls or I-T calls,

on the other hand, there is no identification provided for in the first turn usually. Therefore, affirming recipients' identity is realized through greeting or addressing conducted by callers.

B. Interactional patterns in closing

The comparison between interactional discourse and transactional discourse has not only rendered differences common in both languages but also features that are exclusively exemplified in one language. In the Chinese data, we have observed significant differences in the interactional behavior, especially in closing, demonstrated by recipients for the different types of calls. In the English data, such difference between interactional discourse and transactional discourse is found in initial greeting to summons.

In the T calls recorded in China, the interaction from the recipients shows a lower level of warmth and enthusiasm as is revealed through the lack of reciprocal exchange from the recipients in closing, and consequently resulting in the absence of the leave-taking sequence in the majority of T calls.

This is in sharp contrast with the equally active participation from both callers and recipients as demonstrated in the interactional behavior for both I calls and I-T calls in Chinese.

Specifically, in the forty-two I calls and I-T calls made by Chinese participants to acquaintances, friends or relatives, leave-taking is never absent and there is not even one case of a non-reciprocal closing exchange. Therefore, reciprocal leave-taking exchange is the prototypical behavior, or the norm for closing, in Chinese telephone conversations in general. Its absence in a majority of the T calls is marked compared with other types of calls. However, such findings are not surprising for my Chinese participants because the lack of warmth of the service people in stores towards customers is what they have all encountered personally many times before.

To sum up, with regard to the theoretical distinction between interactional and transactional function of language, the present data provide evidence for its validity. Commonalities across both languages are displayed in the presence and distribution of

phatic utterances, the presence and distribution of pre-closings, initiation of closing, and the choice of language. There are also differences between different types of discourse that are culture specific, namely, the recipients' self-identification sequence in T calls for the English data, and the unreciprocal interaction pattern for closing in the T calls for the Chinese data.

These exemplified differences suggest that the different dimensions of language use, including manner, process, construction of discourse structure, and register might all be constrained by functions and goals of the discourse, and the role relation of the participants in interaction. The study of different functions of language will also inform language teachers and researchers for second language teaching and material development. With awareness of discourse convention, learners of a second language will communicate in a more effective and appropriate way in different contexts.

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